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ABSTRACT

This paper examines elementary education in Brazil, including the most important and difficult problems teachers and teacher educators face, and the main theories and theoretical frameworks that researchers have used in studying these problems. Elementary school teachers complete a special course, corresponding to high school rather than university level. Most elementary school teachers are female, from low middle class families, with little education. Many work in schools with few material resources, earn low salaries, and have low professional status. The most difficult problems facing these teachers include: lack of preparation for teaching poor children with economic, social, and cultural backgrounds different from their own; teacher education programs that ignore practical knowledge and expertise developed by successful teachers; and lack of direct connection between theoretical studies and the practical world. Problems facing researchers investigating these problems include: teacher research and teacher education research that is developed on teachers rather than with teachers; research that blames teachers' classroom practice for the bad results of education; and research findings not reaching the school teachers. New approaches for education research such as ethnographic studies and life stories could help provide better understanding of the reality of elementary school teachers and the social context of schooling. (Contains 10 references.) (ND)

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CRITICAL ISSUES FACING TEACHER EDUCATION AND TEACHER EDUCATION RESEARCH IN BRAZIL

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Paper presented at the symposium of Division K:
Relating Research and Practice in Teacher Education:
International Perspectives

(Chair: Prof.Ken Zeichner)

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CRITICAL ISSUES FACING TEACHER EDUCATION AND TEACHER EDUCATION RESEARCH IN BRAZIL

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Purpose of this paper:

I intend to examine the following main points:

1) In a more general sense, what is the situation of elementary education in Brazil today ?

2) Which are the most important and difficult problems teachers and teacher educators face in our context and how are they currently trying to deal with these problems ?

3) Which are the main theories and theoretical frameworks that researchers have been using in the discussion and attempted solution to these problems, and how useful and relevant have they proved to be?

I would like to make clear that this is the point of view of someone who has worked as a teacher in elementary school, in teacher education programs at the university and have been doing research for the last fifteen years. In the last four years I have also been working at the University where I work in a special teacher program for in-service teachers. Although being here in this panel representing my country, I am conscious that my conclusions will express much of my own experience during all these years.

I will start with a brief presentation aiming to contextualize elementary education in Brazil. Afterwards, I will present what, in my view, is the principal issue in Teacher Education Programs: the relation between Theory and Practice. Next, some new approaches, which I consider useful and relevant to the analysis of our main problems in Teacher Education Research, emphasizing new perspectives in ethnography and life stories will be discussed. I will also try to explain what kind of contribution these approaches may bring to research and practice. At the end of the paper some conclusions will be outlined.

1) In a more general sense, what is the situation of elementary education in Brazil ? - A brief contextualization:

To face the problem of the elementary education in Brazil, the two principal actors have to be examined: teachers and students. In relation to the teachers, some reflections about teacher education itself and the teacher career have to be made, in relation to the students it will be important to talk about their socioeconomic profile.

The first important thing to say is that, to become a elementary teacher in Brazil it is not necessary to take a University degree. On the contrary, there is a special course for elementary school teachers, corresponding to high school level. The great majority of the students taking this degree are female students, and nowadays elementary school teachers come from low middle class families, with little education, and their choice of profession represents social promotion.

Regarding the level of instruction of these teachers, those who have taken a complete degree and who have attended better schools and, therefore, have a better level, are basically concentrated in urban areas in the South and Southeast regions of the country. On the other hand, elementary school teachers with the lowest levels of education are found mainly in rural areas in the Northeast and Middle-West regions of the country, although in all regions, especially in rural areas, there is a high percentage of elementary school teachers who have not completed their degrees, and in some cases have not even

finished their elementary education themselves. They are known as "lay teachers". These data were taken from official government reports and statistics (IBGE- PNAD, 1995).

This does not mean, of course, that the low educational level of these teachers makes them in any sense directly responsible for the bad results of our elementary education. Even those who are considered to be good teachers do not feel stimulated to do a good job. Besides facing problems as schools with few material conditions and resources, Brazilian teachers feel their career have been undervalued. Salaries in Brazil are very low (varying from the equivalent of 50 to 300 US$dollars) and their profession has a low status in society. The Ministry of Education is trying to improve the quality of education establishing a national system of evaluation (SAEB) which has been in practice since 1990, and a new policy that includes basically a "national curriculum". These new strategies are planned to overcome the bad results and improve the level of elementary education in Brazil.

Because of these bad conditions there are not many people who want to be a teacher. As they earn very little, many schools teachers have other jobs to complement their salaries. In other cases, many of them leave present jobs to get other jobs with better salaries.

According to the Educational Census of 1994 (MEC/SEDIAE/SEEC, 1996), there were in Brazil in 1994, aproximately 1.375.000 elementary school teachers, among these: 1.186.000 taught at public schools, and 189.000 taught at private schools. Approximately 280.820 of the total taught at rural areas, at schools were there was only one classroom. This means that this teacher teaches several different levels at the same time in the same classroom, which is the so-called "multigrade class". This happens because there are not enough teachers for all grades especially in rural areas.

We are conscious that teachers cannot be blamed for this difficult situation It is important here to quote Zeichner:

" It is obvious to me that many of the injustices found in our public school system are not caused by the conditions either of the teachers or of the schools. Schools did not cause these problems and school reform by itself cannot solve them. Quality housing, health care, decent wages in addition to a quality educational program are things that will improve our conditions of a good education for children. Although we must do the best in our schools and in our universities, we must also link up with those who are struggling in various others sectors in our society for the achievement of the social and economic pre conditions that will enable our educational efforts to be more successful" (Zeichner, 1993)

2) Which are the most important and difficult problems school teachers and teacher educators face in our context and how are they currently trying to deal with these problems?

A) Teachers are not prepared to teach poor children, with economic, social and cultural background different from their own. Most of the time teachers do not know how to teach poor children. Teacher Education Programs take as their reference the white, middle-class student. When teachers face a diferent reality they think is dificult and sometimes imposible to teach poor students.

According to data about the social context in Brazil (PNAD, 1988, in BARRETO, 1991), the great majority of students at the public elementary school system come from the poor population. These data show that 54% of Brazilian children from 0 to 14 years of age come from families of very low income, of less than 500 dollars per year, and are concentrated in shanty towns at the periphery of big cities. Educational data show us that 90% of children of the urban areas study at public schools. These children come from the poorest families and most of the times fail school examinations.

B) Teacher Education Programs show that Teacher Education often ignores the kind of practical knowledge and expertise that some of the sucessfull teachers have developed through their experience as teachers. Even programs for in-service teachers tend to ignore this kind of knowledge that is produced and built by teachers in every day practice and in their experience in the classroom.

Teacher education programs, instead of seeing teachers as potential producers of knowledge, often see them as a passive audience. Only rarely this practical knowledge of elementary school teachers is taken as a starting point for the development of their own education. We, teacher educators, often forget that they have their own ideas about how to act in the classroom and that these ideas are the product of their reflections upon situations they have to face. They want to share their difficulties and talk about their students with other teachers frequently. Teacher Education Programs often see these teachers disconnected from their concrete reality, their practice and their own story. Again, most of the times we discuss theoretical issues from the point of view of an idealized school, with idealized students. These idealized students correspond to white, middle-class students, whom the teachers expect to be disciplined during classroom activities. When the teacher gets her first job she discovers that this is not the reality of most of our students in the public system. After this initial shock they either become accomodate doing their job mechanically and often give it up, or they develop their own way of dealing with the situation they are faced with.

C) Theory and Practice is a problematic relation in Teacher Education Programs. Quite often our theoretical studies do not have a more direct connection with our practical world. It seems as if they were different worlds and the teacher felt unable to make these connections just by himself.

Teacher education is not an easy task. Teacher Education Programs frequently fail to establish relations between Theory and Practice. Consequently, it is very difficult to establish the connections between the theory that has been learned in the disciplines with

the practice in schools. There seems to be a gap between what is learned in a Teacher Education Program and teachers' classroom practices. It is important here to quote Liston and Zeichner (1991) using the approach of Confrey:

> "... both the teacher and the researcher engage in knowledge production and use, we also sense that teachers'and researchers'intellectual activities, their knowledge production and use, differ in important ways. Essentially we maintain that teachers'intellectual conundrums are concerned more with "solving" practical problems that they personally confront. Researchers, on the other hand, seem to be influenced less by the practical and immediately felt constraints of teaching and instead tend to be influenced and impelled by the discipline-oriented inquiries and practices of fellow researches. In effect, we sense that although both teachers and researchers engage in knowledge production and use, they do so with different purposes in mind and within different social and institutional contexts."(p.126)

It is important to ask what kind of knowledge is seen as essential for teachers. What kind of theoretical and practical knowledge is important to be included in a Teacher Education Program ? Who produces valid, reliable knowledge about teaching ? What strategies and contents would be more useful in teacher education programs ? How can we join academic and practical interests in a curricular proposal ?

Although our reality is a special one, many of our questions are probably similar to the questions of teacher educators and researchers from other countries.

3) Which are the main theories and theoretical frameworks that researchers have been using in the discussion and attempted solution to these problems, and how useful and relevant have they proved to be ?

Teacher Education Programs and Teacher Education Research in the 1970's were influenced by the reprodutivists theories (Bourdieu and Passeron,1970). Reprodutivist theories often led to a pessimistic mode, since nothing seemed to change.In other words, it seemed impossible to change anything. So, although teachers could be well prepared the power of their educational action was extremelly limitated. In the 1980's we were influenced by those who tried to overcome the reproductive approach and tried to see the potential power of school in a divided society like Apple (1979) and Giroux (1983), both had many of their books translated into portuguese, and published in Brazil. This correspond to a moment of reaction to the pessimism provoked by the adoption of reproductivist theories. The end of the military regime and the transition to a democracy brought new hopes for educators.

Educational Researchers in Brazil in the 1990's are strongly influenced by the sociological and the anthrophological approaches. We can say that ethnographic studies and life-stories are now influencing the methodology in Teacher Education Research.

Before facing some of the contributions and some of the limitations of these approaches it will be important to outline some aspects that are also very important to understand how teachers, teachers educators and researchers get along.

A) Teacher Research and Teacher Education Research is frequently developed **on** teachers and not **with** teachers.

Research on teachers is not made by teachers but it is formulated by teacher educators or research experts on the teachers. This often ignores their concrete reality and the ways they deal with the problems they have to face in the classroom. In most of the cases the teacher participates in the research when it involves how to apply a new methodology, or a new approach to the curriculum. This can show us a very restricted view of the role of teachers. In these situations teachers are simply actors incapable of developing by themselves. At a critical perspective, at the level of ideas, they are seen as executors of others'ideas.

B) Research on teachers frequently blames the way teachers act in the classroom for the bad results of education. Things go in a wrong way because of the teachers'behaviour. Teachers are reported in the academic research in a bad way.

Teachers feel used by academic researchers as they allow them to be close to their work and at the time the research report is written they feel academic researchers are "largely insensitive to the complex circumstances with which they are faced in their work and [they] frequently feel exploited by university researchers"(Zeichner, 1995, p155).

C) It is important to have in mind that research on teacher education is mostly carried on by University Professors or by students belonging to a Master or a Doctorate Program, and most of the time they result in a Dissertation or a Thesis. What is trying to be said is that school teachers are not the main agents of researchers on their own practice.

D) Quite often research findings do not even reach the school teachers. The communication and discussion of the research findings is restricted to the meetings that school teachers do not participate. The participation of school teachers in research meetings is restricted, then the communication of research findings are restricted to the Academy.

In the light of the points above some contributions and limitations of these new approaches related to their application in education will be discussed. These new approaches can help us to conceive teachers also as researchers engaged in the reflection of their own practice to help to overcoming of the difficulties listed above.

Ethnographic studies

The application of ethnography in education made a close contact with the researcher and the educational situation investigated possible. Using ethnography techniques of participant observation and interviews it is feasible to document what is not

easy to be documented, describe actions and representations of social actors, reconstruct language, forms of communication and important meanings that are created and recreated in every day practices.

Although the ethnographic process can be open and flexible it does not mean that theoretical references have no use in the research process. On the contrary, the definition of the object of study is made upon a specific interest that has implicit a theoretical choice that can and must be made explicit during the research process.

In the Brazilian context we can be sure that the use of ethnographic techniques has contributed a great deal to our knowledge of what is happening inside schools with students and teachers, and, of course, of the learning process. But, what we see as a limitation in the use of this approach is that it has been very difficult for junior researchers to make important connections between what is described in the ethnography study and the educational theory itself. A strong theoretical background has been necessary, to support consistent analysis and conclusions.

It seems to me that we, researchers, have not already explored and exploited all the real possibilities of the ethnography approach in education.

Life stories

The use of life stories has been an emergent dimension of research. Researchers who are applying this methodology start from the pressuposition that teachers may produce valid and reliable knowledge about teaching from the analysis of their own experiences in classroom and school.Teachers themselves can be producers of their own knowledge. By their personnal life-stories you can find how teachers build their professional identities, attitudes toward students, schools and the teaching process.

Researches that make use of life-stories take as their starting point the presupposition that the main features of the social system may be aprehended through the analysis of our own individual life-stories. Thus we aim to reach an understanding of social life by means of a consideration of personal life-stories.

These new approaches in Teacher Research are trying to value what has not been valued for a long time in educational research: Teachers' Knowledge.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that these new theoretical approaches in Teacher Education Research can help us understand better the concrete reality of elementary school teachers and the social context of schooling, this understanding may lead us to make better decisions in our Teacher Education Programs and give more value to the knowledge these teachers bring with themselves.

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